

Howard Caygill: author of 'Resistance: a philosophy of defiance' - interviewed by Alastair Gray and Philip Holmburg

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Howard Caygill

Author of *On Resistance: A Philosophy of Defiance*

interviewed by Alastair Gray and Phillip Homburg

6th December 2013

Alastair Gray: Professor Caygill, thank you very much for coming to Sussex today. We wanted to just start with a general question: why did you decide to write about resistance now?

Howard Caygill: The book had a very strange genesis. It emerged from within the margins of other works, but at no point did I set out to write on resistance. Rather, it gained a momentum of its own from seminars on resistance I gave at Goldsmiths and Paris VIII. As Benjamin would say, it was written with the left hand. Obviously, there were some occasions or events that made me think that it should be written. I was interested in global events such as the Arab Spring and Occupy. There were also more local incidents such as the student protests and the accompanying surprise at the tactics of containment and the violence used by the police. I was surprised by the surprise expressed at these tactics. Because of this I felt that it would be interesting to look at the problem of resistance and its relationship to the question of domination. This accounts for the pragmatic details in the book of how, on the one hand, the police and the army execute domination and, on the other hand, how particular acts of resistance are carried out.

AG: Do you think there is an important difference between resistance and revolt? And how might resistance differ from protest, if at all?

HC: One of the objectives of this work was to try and free resistance—along with concepts that I think cluster around resistance like revolt and defiance—from the problematic of freedom and revolution. I wanted to look at resistance as a form of politics that is perhaps older than the politics of autonomy and freedom that was inaugurated by Rousseau and pursued by Kant and Hegel. This allows us to view resistance as a form of politics that accompanies the politics of freedom and revolution, but also remains distinct from that political project. There is, then, a cluster of terms that could be considered together such as defiance, revolt, protest and resistance.

However, what struck me in the course of my work was that in many ways these expressions of defiance, which would probably be the more generic concept for me, all had something pre-political about them. That defiance is not motivated politically; it doesn't necessarily lead to political expression. Rather, defiance is something that can take place on many levels. While resistance can take place at the political level, as for example when resistance and defiance are tied with revolutionary or emancipatory political projects. However, it also has some other qualities that make it pre-political. What I mean is that defiance is closer to violence than to speech and politics.

AG: You worked on Levinas before in your book *Levinas and the Political* and Levinas appears again in *On Resistance*. Do you think that we can take a particular political incident or event, perhaps a contemporary event, and interpret that in Levinasian terms? And if so, how might that change or even benefit our understanding of this event?

HC: When I wrote the Levinas book the original title, which was subsequently rejected, was *Levinas and Clausewitz*. From the very start I wanted to say that Levinas was a thinker of war and violence. There had been a certain sentimental interpretation of Levinas: a sentimental understanding of the face of the other that, for me, ultimately led to a soft ethics and a lack of political gravity. In contrast to the ethical reading, I wanted to show that—not only in his prison notebooks which are very sharply political but in *Totality and Infinity* most of all—Levinas is concerned with the question of war and with the question of violence. I am not sure that I did such a good job of it in *Levinas and the Political*, so that's why there is a section in *On Resistance* where I try again. *Totality and Infinity* is about war and Levinas's relationship to war is not a sentimental one—it's Clausewitzian. He says, very strikingly, that war is necessary and in some cases beneficial. What this means in terms of political judgement, or Levinasian political judgement, can be quite disturbing. I have, for example, always been disturbed by his judgement around the massacres in [Sabra and] Shatila. Levinas' response in the broadcast on the Monday, immediately after the murder in the camps, was distant to say the least. He showed no empathy for the victims. Even when pushed to make a comment about how the Palestinian is clearly the other of the Israeli Jew, he had almost no response. Rather, what he offered was an acknowledgement that there are enemies and if there is an enemy there has to be war. So I think if you had to apply this form of judgement to contemporary events, I think a Levinasian political judgement similar to those of *Totality and Infinity*, similar to events like Shatila, wouldn't be recognised as Levinasian. There is such a dominant

understanding of Levinas as an exclusively ethical thinker that his very hard political realism is not recognised as being characteristic of his thought. This is a pity, since in the end the grandeur of Levinas' thought is the way his ethics and political realism come together.

Phillip Homburg: Just returning to Clausewitz for a moment, I found this novel reading of Clausewitz as a Kantian very interesting. This would appear to connect *On Resistance* to a Kantian red thread that runs throughout your work. Could you say a little bit about how your reading of Clausewitz came about and how it's related to your project generally?

HC: Well, Clausewitz has been on my mind for a very long time. I was writing on Clausewitz in the early nineties and have continued to work on him ever since. When I first read Clausewitz it was according to the standard view of him as a theorist of war. He was a contemporary of Hegel who even died, I think within a few miles of Hegel, in the same cholera epidemic. Allegedly they never met, even though they both lived in Berlin. There is just an echo of a meeting where they played cards together at a soirée. However, I began to get the idea that there was something more interesting going on when I read Clausewitz' aesthetic work, particularly his readings of Kant and the concept of genius. This seemed to be a reading of the concept of genius in terms of originality that didn't really fit with the dominant reading in the beginning of the nineteenth century. When I traced it back a little further, I discovered that Clausewitz had been taught by [Johann Gottfried] Kiesewetter at the military academy in Berlin. For anyone that works on Kant, the name Kiesewetter is an immediate alarm bell because he was, perhaps, Kant's closest disciple. His book on Kant was approved and allegedly corrected by Kant in the early 1790's. To have been Kant's student at the end of the eighteenth century meant that, through Kiesewetter, Clausewitz was the closest to Kant of that whole generation of German philosophers. So in a sense he was the real Kantian while Schelling, Fichte, and Hegel were all far more distant. What also made Kiesewetter very different from other readers of Kant, something that emerges in his 1791 work on Kant, *Outline of a Pure General Logic according to Kantian Principles*, is that he is interested above all in the modal category of actuality. This is something that is very striking in Kiesewetter's reading and it's something that becomes striking as well in Kant's late work in the 1790's. For example, Kant begins to emphasise actuality in the *Opus Postumum*. What this means for Kiesewetter is that the modal category of actuality has priority over that of possibility, with the consequent relegation of the centrality of the Kantian idea of freedom. What emerges is a philosophy of action that is not rooted

in freedom. It is this conception of actuality and action that guides Clausewitz's philosophy of war. He is not particularly interested in freedom. Rather, he says that we do not find ourselves in situations of possibility or choice, but in situations of actuality characterised by enmity and chance. In such a situation, all our actions can do is somehow negotiate between those two threats to our security.

PH: So the Clausewitzian realism is perhaps a strange form of Kantianism?

HC: Except that instead of realism it's Clausewitzian actuality and he's making use of that concept of actuality in a very interesting way in emphasising chance and enmity over choice and possibility.

PH: Both in *On Resistance* in the figure of Clausewitz, and in your reading of Walter Benjamin's non-Hegelian form of speculative experience, you emphasise a counter tradition of Kantianism that is in a sense resistant to Hegelian idealism. Is your own thought characterised by this form of resistance?

HC: Yes, at least I would like it to be. What you are identifying is there in any post-Kantian thought. So in *On Resistance* the first mentions of Hegel address the logic of essence and "Force and Understanding" section on the *Phenomenology*. Basically the argument is that even in Hegel there is an exit from Kant's thought. It is an exit that I also see in Walter Benjamin's development of a speculative philosophy that does not accept the critical strictures that confine knowledge to spatio-temporal appearances. This is something that I find in Kant as well in the *Opus Postumum*. There, Kant becomes his own radical margin by basically arguing for the primacy of reason over even intuition and perception.

PH: I found your reading of Marx contra Nietzsche interesting. I see some Benjaminian aspects in your reading of Marx that asserts that novel political forms can spring up from within the context of resistance. I am wondering if maybe that is historically specific to Marx's time or is that something you can generalise to the Occupy and Spring movements that it might be possible to say that at this point or some point in the future that is has been subsumed, but maybe they also point to the emergence of a new form of resistance.

HC: Yes, and also that these examples of resistance open up a retrospective glance on other activities of resistance as well. The Marx and Nietzsche analysis is very important in the book for me because they share a critical

relationship to Clausewitz. I also want to show that *ressentiment* and a politics of *ressentiment* is something that is continuously shifting in both of their works. There are certain moments in Marx's *Civil War in France* texts, for example, where there is extreme socialist *ressentiment*. There are, then, other moments in Marx's work where *ressentiment* falls away and is replaced by extraordinary affirmative and futural thinking. Similarly in Nietzsche, at the very moment that he is criticising the slave revolt of morals in the *Genealogy of Morals* he is actually succumbing to *ressentiment* as well. It is at this point that Marx returns. By bringing them together it becomes clear that it is very hard to sustain a position that does not result in a form of *ressentiment*. It is hard to sustain a politics of affirmation. It was also very striking how both Marx and Nietzsche were looking at the experience of the Commune and saying that the experience of the Commune changes our understanding of what came before. In both cases, early Christianity and opposition to the empire, an understanding of resistance is not only crucial for a self-understanding of the present, but also for an understanding of the past.

I think this characteristic is something that happens in resistance more generally. One part of the book of which I am particularly fond is the discussion of the Greenham Common resistance. This part of the book was very much motivated by the anti-fascist and anti-Nazi lineage of the Greenham women, but also by the difference between their practice of occupation and the more recent experiences of Occupy. The Greenham women, particularly at Yellow Gate, considered their struggle to be something that might take decades. When they were evicted, and sometimes they would be evicted several times a day, they would infallibly return. This was a continuous, disciplined resistance that lasted for almost two decades. In light of this, it seemed to me as if the contemporary resistances and occupations gave up too quickly. It struck me that the lesson left by the Greenham women had been forgotten or had not been heard. Somehow the dissatisfaction around Occupy then made it possible to go back and try to listen to that lesson again.

In general, I find that there is another point that continues to worry me about the resistance book: it sets off from or departs from the premise that there cannot be a concept of resistance. As soon as resistance becomes conceptualised then it somehow loses its resistance. Therefore, rather than a concept of resistance, what there could be is an archive of resistances from which a Benjaminian constellation could emerge. So, for me, there is something characteristic of resistance that means that each particular act of resistance is always going to be part of a network or constellation- what Clausewitz called the capacity to resist. So as soon as you think of one resistance then all the other ones appear.

PH: It changes our understanding retroactively?

HC: Retroactively and hopefully perspectively as well.

PH: Your book seems to be telling maybe a different story in the wake of the financial crisis in some quarters to theories of structure that emphasise the pervasive power of social domination, capitalist form of subsumption and real abstraction. From the perspective of this standpoint the form of domination could be said to totally determine the structure of resistance itself. Is there a way to account for that from within your account of resistance?

HC: It seemed to me that even in excellent work, whose radical credentials can't really be questioned, there nevertheless remained an over-investment in the concept of domination. This is something that became clearer to me as I was working through the book and it's why the book's subtitle is "A philosophy of defiance". The problem is, as I see it, that domination is considered to be the default position that we have in all senses to resist. Domination is what must be resisted and this means that domination is presupposed. I saw this particularly in the work of Arendt. She begins with total domination and leaves us with a problem: how can there be resistance if we are in a situation of *total* domination? Similarly, Gregoire Chamayou's *The Manhunt Doctrine* begins from the standpoint of domination in spite of its impeccably critical account of domination, particularly racial domination in the United States, it remains fundamentally invested in domination. It sets out from the standpoint of the lynchers rather than the resisters. A pattern seems to emerge here that can be seen again, for example, in David Graeber's *Debt* with its close attention to patterns and methods of domination. There are moments when resistance is described, but resistance or defiance is not considered to be the default position or point of departure. My interest in Italian Marxism and the autonomist movement—Tronti in the 60's and 70's—helped me understand that, in fact, domination does not necessarily possess the initiative, to use Clausewitzian language; what comes first is the threat of defiance. First of all there is defiance, and then domination tries to meet that defiance or to anticipate it and strategically meet it in advance. What I want to ask is: what happens when we try to start thinking from the default position of defiance rather than domination? So, first of all there is defiance and it is domination that needs to be explained. This leads to another aspect of the book in which I try to argue for the power of strategic thinking. Basically, what Clausewitz tells us is to work with strategy rather than logic. What is most important for Clausewitz when reasoning

strategically is to secure the initiative, always to make the first move.

PH: This is Debord as well?

HC: Yes, Debord was an excellent Clausewitzian. But, to return to the initiative, it seemed to me as if there was a tradition of political theory that was based on surrendering the initiative. In succumbing to the fascination of domination we lose the strategic initiative. A final side of that, something that struck me throughout the work, is there was nothing that angered domination or the state more than subalterns reasoning strategically. Strategy is felt to be reserved for the side of domination, so strategically reasoned defiance is a very disturbing and unwanted phenomenon. It has to be dealt with by draconian conspiracy laws.

PH: In light of awarding the Gillian Rose memorial prize, do you have any reflections on Gillian Rose in relationship to the contemporary profile of critical theory and did she make a significant contribution to the reception of critical theory while at Sussex University.

HC: I think she certainly did, but within a very complicated context. It is very encouraging to see a rediscovery of her Adorno and Hegel books. With those books she gave a different understanding of a critical philosophy, either from a more Hegelian-Marxist position, which was also very powerful here at that time, and also from the more French oriented Lacanian and deconstruction forms of critical thinking...

PH: What would be referred to as continental philosophy?

HC: Yes. So I think she made a very particular contribution. I think another aspect of her contribution was the quality of her scholarship. That she really insisted on very high quality research and very sophisticated forms of expression of that research. I think that was something that irritated a lot of her readers, but nevertheless also inspired many others.

PH & AG: Thank you very much!

Howard Caygill (H.Caygill@kingston.ac.uk) is professor of Modern European Philosophy at Kingston University London. As well as *On Resistance*, he is the author of works such as *Levinas and the Political* and *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience*, among others.

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